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ABSTRACT

Three studies of language brokering among linguistic minority (LM) children are reviewed and discussed. In child language brokering, children act as linguistic mediators, not translators or interpreters, for their limited-English-proficient parents and relatives. The purpose of the studies was to describe brokering in LM communities and to examine its effects from the perspectives of culture and affect, cognition, and language and literacy. In the first study, 9 children aged 3-14 who brokered in various linguistic communities were interviewed. Data obtained were used to construct surveys used in the two subsequent studies. In the second study, 64 Chinese and Vietnamese-American students participated, and in the third, 35 Latino students were surveyed. Students were asked to report on their brokering activities and how they believed it affected them culturally and linguistically. In addition, self-report data on language proficiency were gathered. Results suggest that brokers assumed the role of surrogate parent, for themselves and siblings, and gained confidence, independence, knowledge, and trust when compared with other children. However, they also experienced increased stress. Brokering children also acquired oral and written language skills quickly and attained adult-level reasoning. Implications are discussed. Contains 28 references. (MSE)

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Culture, Language, and Literacy:

The Effects of Child Brokering on Language Minority Education

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Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the

American Education Research Association, April 8-12, 1996

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Children Translating for Parents:

The Effects of Language Brokering in Linguistic Minority Communities

Little research has been done on the phenomenon of child language brokering (Downing & Dwyer, 1981; Geutemann, 1983; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith, 1984; Shannon, 1990), where children act as linguistic intermediators for their limited English proficient parents and relatives. Unlike translators and interpreters, child language brokers mediate communication, not merely transmit it. This paper reviews the findings of three studies of language brokering among a diverse group of linguistic minority (LM) students. The purpose of these studies was to describe brokering in linguistic minority (LM) communities and to examine its effects from three perspectives: 1) culture and affect, 2) cognition, and 3) language and literacy. We will first provide very brief reviews of the literature in all three areas We will then present our results, discuss the findings, and consider the pedagogical and policy implications of brokering.

Literature Review

Cultural and Affective Perspectives

The little research on language brokering to date suggests that brokers perform a far broader role than that of interpreter and translator. Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984), for example, examined the home and school interactions of a 9-year-old Sino-Vietnamese student, finding that the subject, V., both translated and mediated communication for the family. In addition, the researchers noted that V. acted as a socializing agent for the family

by transmitting important cultural information to them. Harris and Sherwood (1978) provide an example of how brokers influence and to a great extent determine the interactions between the parties. While interpreting for her father in a business interaction, their Italian-Canadian subject, B, judges the culturally and linguistically appropriate versions of her father's words to convey the message in such a way as to increase the chances for a successful outcome. In one interaction, she does this at the risk of drawing some of her father's anger on herself:

Father to B: "Digli che e un imbecille!" (Tell him he's a nitwit).

B to 3rd party: "My father won't accept your offer."

Father angrily in Italian: "Why didn't you tell him what I told you?" (p. 157)

In his role as language broker, B greatly effects the success and failure of the interactions beyond what any mere literal translator might do.

The added responsibilities of this mediating and decision making appear to result in increased confidence for brokers. Shannon (1990), who examined the brokering experiences of Spanish-speaking Adan and his younger sister Leti, suggests that as brokers' efficacy increases, their level of confidence increases. A certain status was accorded to the child brokers in the family, and their effectiveness as brokers in a variety of circumstances meant increased prestige among siblings, parents, and the extended family.

Literacy and Language

Translation and bilingualism

A few investigators have looked at language brokering from the points of view of translation and bilingualism. Harris and Sherwood (1978) claim that translation is an innate

skill of all bilinguals, citing evidence from children as young as three years old (Harris, 1980). Harris notes that translation is not a simple cognitive or linguistic task of decoding; rather, it requires the application of other knowledge in order to extract meaning from the words and context, with comprehension of the oral or written text. Malakoff and Hakuta (1991) found that bilingual children can not only translate, but do so quite accurately. Their two studies, involving a total of 68 Spanish/English child bilinguals, found that they made few errors in either language when translating. Malakoff and Hakuta's analysis emphasizes that translation, even that done by a child, is not a simple, surface-level decoding process, but a rather complex series of linguistic manipulations.

Language acquisition

The scattering of available studies also suggests that brokering results in increased first and second language acquisition. Shannon (1990) found that while no formal measurement of acquisition was possible, the demands of brokering would very likely result in increased vocabulary knowledge in both languages for her subjects. Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984) also provide evidence of likely language acquisition by their subject, V., who brokered in a variety of situations for his parents, displaying a high level of "sophistication in literacy skills" (17). It seems probable that with such wide contact with otherwise unfamiliar, adult-level language, there was acquisition taking place. Several studies on brokering in French-English schools in Canada (Heller, 1984, 1987, 1989; Heller and Barker, 1988) show that bilinguals in those settings must develop a wide array of

vocabulary to deal with both social and academic language demands, the results of which are likely to result in further acquisition (Tomlinson, 1989).

Cognition

The tasks that brokers are asked to take on are often cognitively far above what they or their non-brokering peers are asked to carry out in school. Shannon (1990), Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984), and Downing and Dwyer (1981) all found that the child brokers they examined carried out adult-level tasks, such as negotiating with social service agencies and making decisions on educational matters for themselves and their siblings.

The Studies

The three studies we review here, McQuillan & Tse (in press), Tse (1994a & in press), focussed on a diverse group of LM adults who brokered as children. Several research questions were formulated based on the available research. We will focus in this paper only on the following four:

1. What were the settings, who were the participants, and what was the nature of the language brokering they had engaged in?

2. How did brokering affect the informants acquisition of both their first and second languages?

3. How did brokering relate to in- and out-of-school literacy, in terms of the types of texts read?

4. What were the perceived cognitive demands made u[illegible]okers as compared to their non-brokering peers, and how did these relate to the tasks brokers performed at school?

Subjects and Methodology

In the first study, nine subjects who brokered as children were interviewed. They had been chosen based upon their diversity of language usage and age in order to provide for a maximum variation sampling (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989) within various linguistic minority communities as well as a range of ages of arrival (from 3 to 14 years). All of the subjects had native or near-native levels of English language proficiency and their self-reported levels of L1 oral and literacy skills range from none to high. Their first languages included Cambodian, Cantonese, Korean, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

The data collected in the initial study was used to construct the surveys used in the two subsequent studies. Both involved high school subjects. In the first, 64 Chinese and Vietnamese-American students took part, and in the second, 35 Latino students were surveyed. The survey asked the students to report on their brokering activities and how they believed it affected them culturally and linguistically. In addition, self-report data was collected on language proficiency. For the sake of brevity, selected results from the three studies will be presented together.

Results

Prevalence of Brokering

Table 1 shows that 90% of the Chinese and Vietnamese subjects reported brokering, and of those who hadn't, all but one had an older sibling who brokered. Together with the finding from the Latino subjects of 100% reporting brokering, this suggests that brokering is widespread among LM students.

Insert Table 1 about here

Settings, participants and types of brokering

The subjects reported performing many types of brokering in various situations in and out of school. In school, they reported serving as interpreters and orally translating texts for their parents, answering phone calls from teachers and school officials, and translating written communication from the schools in the form of notes, announcements, and permissions slips. One subject in the initial study, Anita, recalled orally translating mortgage agreements, bank statements, credit card bills, and other financial documents for her parents at the age of 12 and 13. Table 2 shows the types of documents that the surveyed subjects reported translating.

Insert Table 2 about here

Outside of school, the subjects reported brokering in settings that include banks, government offices, stores, restaurants, and doctors' offices. Several commented that they could not imagine a setting in which they had not brokered. (See Table 3)

Insert Table 3 about here

The primary agents involved in brokering were a parent and another adult, such as a teacher, clerk, or other institutional officials. Subjects also reported brokering for their siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, peers in schools, neighborhood children, and parents' friends and acquaintances. The results are shown in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

Cultural and affective effects

Perhaps the most salient feature of the data as it relates to cultural and affective effects was that all of the subjects reported taking on parental duties for themselves and their siblings, what we term acting as "surrogate parents." Notes brought home, for example, were often not shown to parents. In many instances, permission slips were signed by the subjects themselves or by the parents, who did not have knowledge of their contents.

Nearly all of the informants in the original study noted that their parents generally entrusted them with handling school matters independently or with minimal parental

involvement and this resulted in them sometimes taking on sole responsibility for making educational decisions. One subject, Maria, recalled that she often "felt like the adult," making important educational decisions and only later informing her parents. Two other subjects, Anita and Rebecca, mentioned often by-passing their parents when taking care of younger siblings in such things as writing letters to school, signing notices, and contacting teachers and administrators. Several of the subjects reported taking advantage of this trust when dealing with what they considered small matters, such as signing their own permission slips. However, they did not consider this to be an abuse of confidence, but rather, just another way of assuming tasks that their parents were unable to perform, thereby relieving them of the burden.

Two other effects of brokering reported by the informants are increased general knowledge of the world and broadened cultural understanding. Three informants, Laura, Gina, and Jennifer all mentioned that because they were asked to explain cultural differences to the different parties they brokered between, they gained valuable insight into each. The brokering was performed in wide arrays of situations, resulting in the acquisition of knowledge about how institutions function, such as banks and government offices, and the appropriate types of interactions in different social and cultural settings.

Some of the negative aspects of brokering reported by the informants are added stress and burden associated with increased responsibility, which some said resulted in frustration, resentment, and embarrassment. Several subjects said that at times they felt resentful toward their parents and siblings for demanding enormous amounts of time and attention. Gina

recalls wanting to spend time with her friends but was kept at home by her mother. Both Rebecca and Kim recalled feeling ashamed of their parents because they could not speak English, especially in social situations and public places. Jennifer, who accompanied her parents to the government assistance office, said her embarrassment at applying for assistance was compounded by her parents' lack of English language skills.

The subsequent studies of high school students confirmed many of these cultural and affective findings. As indicated in Table 5, most of the subjects like to broker, or at the very least did not dislike it. A significant percentage said they were proud to broker, felt that it made them more mature and independent, and believed brokering helped them increase their knowledge of American culture. Only a small number, however, thought brokering to be a burden or were embarrassed by it.

Insert Table 5 about here

Language and literacy effects

Almost all of the informants considered language development to be a benefit of brokering. Increased language acquisition, while self-reported, is confirmed indirectly by the rapidity with which the subjects began brokering after their arrival in the United States, as well as the complexity of texts translated. Many subjects began brokering almost immediately upon arrival, and a majority was functioning in the role within three years and handling some rather difficult documents. For example, the Chinese and Vietnamese

subjects began to broker quite quickly after arrival, with the median time being only 1 year.

As seen in Table 6, a majority of the Chinese and Vietnamese subjects felt brokering aided their language acquisition of both their first and second language. The foreign born subjects reported in significantly higher numbers that brokering helped them learn English (69% vs. 26% of the U.S. born), and over halof of both the foreign and U.S. born subjects (54% and 64%, respectively) noted that brokering helped them learn more of their first language. Some brokers stated that their brokering experience was crucial to the maintenance of their native language. Kim, a Vietnamese-American who immigrated at age 3, directly attributes brokering for her first language maintenance. She reports that her sister who is one year younger, did not maintain and develop her Vietnamese because she did not broker.

Insert Table 6 about here

Given that many reported translating relatively complex documents such as rental agreements, their high level of English literacy may not always be revealed in school assessment. The mean grade point average of the Latino subjects, the only subjects for whom we have self-reported school performance, was only 2.68 on a 1-4 scale.

Cognitive effects

In addition to comprehending rather high level vocabulary, brokers in the first study reported making decisions on questions regarding course selection in school, financial aid forms, school registration of neighbor children and siblings, the screening of phone calls, the separation of "important" mail from junk correspondence, and other day-to-day activities normally done by parents and other adults. While the exact cognitive nature of such tasks are difficult to measure, they were at a level well above that normally executed by their peers, or children in American culture generally.

Table 2 shows the types of documents the high school brokers reported translating, such as rental agreements and certain job applications. Translating these documents would require a sophistication far beyond that called for by many school tasks.

Discussion

Cultural and Affective

Taking on substantial amounts of parental duties, especially those between home and school, resulted in brokers assuming the role of "surrogate parent" for themselves and their siblings. As we have seen, the responsibilities they assume are not merely interpretation or translation in nature, but include decision making and mediation. These findings support the research done by Harris and Sherwood (1978), Downing and Dwyer (1981), and Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984) who found that brokers functioned in a wider capacity as conveyers of linguistic and cultural information.

Our affective findings suggests that children's self-concepts are impacted and shaped by the brokering experience. In addition to the benefit of boosted confidence that Shannon

(1990) cites, the subjects in this study reported other benefits that included greater independence, maturity, knowledge, and trust when compared to other children. However, some they also felt that additional responsibility brought increased burdened and stress. It is clear that brokers must contend with different sets of emotional and social factors not faced by their peers.

Moll (1992) defines funds of knowledge as "the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive" (p. 21). The subjects noted that their parents lacked important information about the nature of American schools and their workings. However, their parents did possess valuable funds of knowledge of the first culture. Passing on this knowledge helped many of the brokers develop appreciation for their heritage and culture. High levels of sensitivity toward and broadened understanding of the first culture, together with their newly acquired knowledge of the second culture, make brokers particularly valuable sources of intercultural information and insight.

It seems from the brokers' recounting of their experiences that communication between home and school for many LM students are mediated at best, non-existent at worst, depending on the level of responsibility students assume for making educational decisions. In many cases, parents who reportedly valued education highly had to relinquish decision making responsibilities to their children to such an extent that they remained largely ignorant about their children's education. In addition, LM students often feel the responsibility to shoulder, to whatever degree possible, the enormous task of acculturating. The result is that

educators often receive inaccurate or incomplete information from child informants and they fail to establish the home-school relationship that strengthens support for student success.

Language and Literacy

Krashen (1985) hypothesizes that the more new comprehensible input a learner receives, given a positive affective disposition, the more language they will acquire. Language brokers all report such acquisition as taking place, specifically in those areas which Krashen would define as slightly above the current level of acquisition. New vocabulary was encountered both in the first and second language during brokering. The subjects' self-reports appear to support Krashen's hypothesis on language acquisition. Indeed, in cases such as Kim's, the Vietnamese-American broker in the first study, brokering provided the sole source of input in the absence of any formal instruction, leading to the maintenance of relatively high levels of oral proficiency in the native language.

Particularly impressive about the broker experience is the rapidity with which oral and written language was apparently acquired in order to allow the subjects to translate very advanced level of the texts for their parents and peers. Subjects report translating linguistically sophisticated government and financial documents as early as the age of 12, although the precise complexity of these texts cannot be verified by the researchers. One may reasonably ask if brokers indeed were comprehending the text they were translating. Both Harris (1980) and Malakoff and Hakuta (1991) note that translation (both oral and written) involves a complicated process of comprehension and reformulation of a text's meaning and Malakoff and Hakuta confirm that child bilinguals are reasonably accurate

translators and interpreters (the median age of their subjects was 10.7 years). The best check of their comprehension, however, was the resolution of the problem that comprehending the text involved: the rent was paid, the bank accounts balanced, the children enrolled in school.

The self-reported ability of the brokers to read adult-level texts as children raises several issues in regards to the theoretical models and practical assessments used in bilingual education. Cummins (1989) states that students' proficiency in reading academic texts (termed Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)) lags significantly behind their oral proficiency (termed Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)). Both Cummins (1989) and Collier (1987) have noted that on average students take between five and seven years to reach the fiftieth percentile in academic reading. Reading scores for these calculations were taken from standardized tests. The broker subjects, however, were able to comprehend texts not only above their grade level (itself an important challenge to traditional views of literacy), but in their second language. While Cummins and Collier's analysis is no doubt correct for the sort of unfamiliar academic reading involved in psychometric testing, the evidence presented here suggests that LM students (and presumably native English speakers) may be able to handle high level texts much more quickly than school data indicate, given proper conditions.

What emerges from the broker evidence is strong support for the socio-cultural view of what might be termed "situational literacy," where reading performance is differentiated based upon the conditions present when encountering a text. Those real world conditions

under which these LM brokers interacted with texts as brokers was very likely distinct from their normal school experiences. They include:

-a text read for a specific, understood, and authentic purpose;

-assistance available from a more capable other;

-a perception by brokers that their role was an important one in the transaction.

Under such conditions, the brokers were able to perform at amazingly high levels of literacy in comparison with even their native English speaking peers. Although more evidence is needed, the differential literacy finding of brokers may mean rethinking the entire notion of what students can and cannot comprehend at an early age.

A situation model of literacy, then, encompasses several possibilities in terms of performance in and out of school, as indicated in Figure 1. Students may, for example, do poorly reading in school, while doing quite well in a local government office or hospital. Indeed, there exists the possibility of students doing below grade level work in their school assignments while at the same time comprehending and translating the teacher's notes intended for their parents. Traditional assessments assume that only Case 1 of Figure 1 (successful performance both in and out of school) or Case 4 (failure in and out of school) is possible. By relying only on school literacy, schools may misjudge the capabilities of seemingly unsuccessful learners when viewed against their performance outside the classroom.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Gee (1992) and Smith's (1988) work on the contexts of reading and writing and the importance of membership in certain "clubs" is also strongly supported by the broker experience. When literacy is seen as an interaction among the reader, the text, and the environment, it is easy to see why differential performance is not only possible, but likely. Similarly, readers who view their roles as important in a literacy transaction, as is the case with the brokers, are thereby enculturated into a specific practice of reading and writing which they then come to value as important. They join the club of bilingual brokers.

Cognition

The evidence shows that brokering involves a great deal of negotiated meaning and problem solving with the assistance of a more capable other, closely matching Vygotsky's model of learning. The tasks engaged in by the subjects, including decision making involving various school and family matters, suggest that, as in the literacy findings discussed above, these LM children are capable in many cases of what we normally associate with adult-level reasoning in real world contexts. Again, the contextualized and authentic nature of the day to day problems they were asked to solve no doubt played a key role in assisting brokers in carrying out their tasks, as is hypothesized by the situated cognition model of Greeno (1989) and Rogoff (1984), and confirmed by the evidence presented by Saxe (1988) with regards to Brazilian street vendors and Scribner (1984) involving adult grocery shoppers. In addition, the very fact that brokers are involved in translation and

interpretation suggests that they are executing high level cognitive reasoning as seen by the analysis of the metalinguistic processes involved in translating done by Malakoff and Hakuta (1991).

Implications and Further Research

There are several important pedagogical and policy implications involved in the issue of language brokering. First, schools must recognize that brokers are themselves decision makers--surrogate parents--in many aspects of their schooling, from routine matters of signing permission slips to selecting courses which have an impact on their academic future. This role is created for them due to a lack of support for non-English speaking parents in many schools and other agencies. Identifying and providing additional support services for such children and their families is imperative if these students are to have the same education opportunities as language majority students.

Second, educators should also be aware that even though brokers seem to gain linguistic competence in both English and their native language, serving in this new role results in increased stress and frustration for some of the student. These negative results may be difficult to detect since the student may appear to handle the added responsibilities without problems.

Third, the rapidity with which brokers seem to acquire a sufficient level of English to translate adult-level texts means that both theorists and practitioners in literacy may need to rethink how LM students learn to read and write and under what conditions their performance is displayed. Clearly school literacy is only one aspect of a child's competence

in reading and writing. Any school diagnosis based on what may be for the child an unauthentic context for literacy could distort or ignore the student's competency in other settings. Schools must look beyond the classroom to evaluate accurately their students' literacy and cognitive performance.

Many important questions remain unanswered about language brokering. A few that researchers need to address include:

1. What is the level of comprehension by brokers of the texts they are asked to translate? More careful analysis needs to be done of the types of texts and situations in which brokers interact with them in order to translate and mediate communication for adults. There are many methodological issues involved in measuring reading comprehension and difficulty (see, for example, Meyer, Marsiske, and Willis, 1993). Nonetheless, an exploration of a child broker's literacy performance would serve to validate the current findings and give us greater insight into the processes used by bilinguals in reading and writing.

2. What are the specific strategies for translation and mediation used by brokers? The sophistication of child translators observed by Harris (1980) indicate that brokers employ a range of metalinguistic and metacognitive strategies. By better understanding the nature of those strategies and how they relate to the socio-cultural setting, we may be able to grasp underlying differences and similarities, if any, in monolingual and bilingual language processing, as well as the relationship between scientific and everyday cognition, assuming this is indeed a legitimate distinction.

3. Why do students perform poorly in school yet succeed in the real world? The present study suggests that other LM brokers perform differentially in regards to reading and writing depending on the setting. Knowing the conditions for school success and failure of such brokers could help us understand the variables involved in academic achievement of other LM students.

4. What are some of the specific types of knowledge gained from brokering experiences? It may be useful for teachers to know what information and strategies that are acquired by brokers outside of school could be integrated into the classroom.

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Table 1

Prevalence of Brokering

Chinese/Vietnamese (N = 64)	90%*
Latino (N = 35)	100%

*All but one subject who didn't report brokering indicated having an older sibling who brokered.

Table 2

Documents Translated by Latino Brokers (N = 35)

Notes and letters from school	97%
Job applications	74%
Credit card statements	47%
Bank statements	44%
Rental agreements	44%
Immigration forms	24%

Table 3

Locations Where Students Brokered

	Chin/Viet (N = 64)	Latino (N = 35)
Home	80%	86%
School	66%	80%
Store	64%	80%
Post office	25%	17%
Bank	24%	46%
Government offices	17%	17%
Restaurant	------	54%
Hospital	------	46%
Work	------	34%

Table 4

People For Whom Students Brokered

	Chin/Viet (N = 64)	Latino (N = 35)
Parents	92%	87%
Friends	63%	91%
Relatives (other than parents/siblings)	56%	74%
Siblings	50%	49%
Neighbors	38%	69%
Teachers	34%	43%
School officials	22%	34%
Strangers	------	74%
Business people	------	34%

Table 5

Student Attitudes Toward Language Brokering

	Chin/Viet (N = 64)	Latino (N = 35)
I like to broker.	52%	54%
I'm proud to broker.	48%	48%
Brokering made me more independent and mature.	45%	31%
I know American culture better because I brokered.	38%	11%
Brokering is a burden.	17%	9%
I don't like to broker.	14%	23%
I'm embarrassed to broker.	11%	9%

Table 6

Brokering as Language Development/Maintenance

	Chinese/Viet (N = 64)	
	Foreign	U.S.
Brokering helped me learn English	69%	26%
	(Chi square = 8.69, p < .01)	
Brokering helped me learn more of my first language	54%	64%
	(Chi square = .47, p = .49)	

Figure 1

Model of Situational Literacy Performance

	In School	Out of School
Case 1	+	+
Case 2	+	--
Case 3	--	+
Case 4	--	--

+ = success

-- = failure